



CASE STUDY

Embedded Authentic Learning through Job Shadowing: A Pilot Study with International Pre-Masters Students

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ABSTRACT

This case study reports on a job-shadowing pilot within an international Pre-Masters EAP-led Research and Critical Analysis unit at a UK arts university. Drawing on experiential learning, Communities of Practice and dialogic pedagogy, the project positioned job shadowing as an authentic encounter linking academic literacies with creative industry practice. Data from tutorials and surveys indicate strong perceived value, with students reporting gains in disciplinary understanding and employability skills, while evidence from EAP outputs suggests emerging ability to translate experiential encounters into academic discourse. Challenges around securing placements, processing technical discourse and linking experiences explicitly to Final Major Projects highlight the need for closer alignment with discipline modules. The study underscores the value of EAP mediation in enabling access to Communities of Practice and demonstrates how authentic professional observation can meaningfully support academic literacies and postgraduate readiness, while also raising questions of scalability, workload, and institutional alignment.

KEYWORDS:

Experiential learning, English for Academic Purposes, Job shadowing, Communities of Practice, Employability

To cite this article:

Mulders, E. (2026). Embedded Authentic Learning through Job Shadowing: A Pilot Study with International Pre-Masters Students. *BALEAP Journal of Research & Practice*, 2(1), 24-49.

<https://doi.org/10.31273/baleapjrp.v2.n1.2157>



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Context and Rationale/Aims

This case study was conducted at a UK arts university with a cohort of students enrolled on an international Pre-Masters programme. Forming part of the assessment for the Research and Critical Analysis unit, it directly supported the development of academic literacies, language skills, and research competencies central to EAP teaching. The pilot job-shadowing activity was developed as an extension to the author's own previous research into experiential and authentic learning, particularly regarding student engagement in out-of-class learning spaces within creative and practice-based disciplines (Mulders, 2024). During semester 1, students had responded enthusiastically to external activities and requested further opportunities for authentic professional engagement.

In response to this feedback and aligning with QAA and OfS employability-related benchmarks, a structured yet flexible job-shadowing component was integrated into the research phase of the Final Major Project (FMP). Reading week was identified as an appropriate time for students to undertake job shadowing, enabling them to observe real-world creative practice relevant to their future career pathways.

The job-shadowing model constitutes an authentic learning encounter, giving students access to unfiltered professional processes and providing opportunities to apply EAP-informed skills such as academic observation, professional communication, and reflective documentation, thereby bridging the gap between academic study and workplace practices.

This study aimed to investigate how a structured job-shadowing experience can support professional identity development and employability skills while strengthening core EAP competencies among international Pre-Masters students. The experience develops research observation skills, critical evaluation and reflective practice, and promotes student autonomy while enhancing academic literacies, including discipline-specific reading, writing, and oral communication needed to interpret, articulate, and evaluate key concepts.

Research and Theory: A selective review of literature

While creative disciplines and English for Specific Purposes (ESAP) are frequently discussed within separate scholarly traditions, this study approaches them as pedagogically interdependent. Academic literacies research has long challenged deficit and bolt-on models of language support, arguing instead for embedded and discipline-responsive approaches (Li, 2021). In creative disciplines, experiential learning generates situated communicative practices that ESAP pedagogy must mediate, interpret, and render visible. The literature is therefore considered dialogically rather than as a set of parallel strands.

In exploring ESAP in the creative arts, Carr et al. (2021) emphasize the need for EAP practitioners to work *'in, with, and through'* disciplinary contexts to support students' access to

the values and practices of their fields. Similarly, James (2023) highlights the value of aligning EAP instruction with students' academic disciplines, offering a pedagogical rationale that resonates with experiential approaches such as job shadowing. This pilot extends these principles by embedding job-shadowing within the Research and Critical Analysis unit, thereby facilitating observable skills transfer into FMP outputs. Jeon (as cited in James, 2023) further argues that inadequate integration between EAP and subject-area courses can make it difficult for students to recognise the relevance of, and effectively apply, transferable skills taught in EAP. The pilot addresses this gap through tutor-mediated placements that helped students overcome initial networking challenges.

Preliminary scoping within the BALEAP community revealed no prior examples of job shadowing at the Pre-Master's level. A related model was identified in an internal internship scheme within the University of York's TEFL programme (Lamont, 2023). This apparent scarcity highlights a gap in the literature: while experiential learning and internships are well documented, short, structured observation-based learning at the transitional Pre-Master's stage remains underexplored, especially for international students.

Job shadowing differs from internships in terms of duration, intensity, and purpose. While internships emphasise skills application, job shadowing centres on observation, reflection, and contextual understanding: key attributes in developing professional identity and employability. As such, job shadowing can be positioned within the broader discourse on experiential learning, in which learners construct knowledge through direct engagement with authentic professional environments, while its pedagogical emphasis on experimentation, reflection and meaning-making aligns it equally with creative and dialogic approaches to learning. Wiggins (1998) and Bell (2022) both highlight the link between authenticity and deeper learning, suggesting that such opportunities allow students to integrate a range of skills and learning experiences.

Several overlapping strands of research informed the pilot study. Addison (2014) critiques the constraints of narrowly defined learning objectives and performative outcomes, advocating instead for tutor–student collaboration that fosters “situated meaning-making” and autonomy. The pilot reflects this approach through its direct response to student requests for authentic learning situations. He contends that collaborative, open-ended environments provide significant learning results and greater opportunities valuing dialogue, experimentation, and uncertainty. Similarly, Orr (2025) argues for “stretch” through scaffolded, uncertain tasks: conditions that foster creativity and reflection. These perspectives position job shadowing as an *authentic pedagogical encounter*, highlighting the value of observing informal, process-based interactions where genuine creative growth occurs.

Peppler et al. (2022) propose a framework for Connected Arts Learning situated at the intersection of personal interest, supportive mentorship, and academic progression. This approach positions tutors as facilitators, connecting students, practitioners, and communities in a broader educational ecosystem that values self-organisation and relational engagement. This

emphasis on connection aligns with Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner's (2015) concept of *Communities of Practice* (CoP), in which newcomers develop professional identity through socially-situated participation. For international students, structured entry into such communities may mitigate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging. Job shadowing therefore operates not only as an authentic learning experience but also as a relational bridge that enables students to begin forming professional networks and participating in disciplinary communities.

Dialogic pedagogy (Bakhtin, 1981), further underlines the relational nature of learning. Teaching is reconceptualised as co-inquiry, with students positioned as active meaning-makers. Within this study, reflective and dialogic response sessions allowed students to interpret and negotiate understandings of professional practice, granting them agency and reinforcing the participatory dimensions of job-shadowing.

From an EAP perspective, Watson (2003, as cited in Bell, 2022) discusses the use of real-world tasks to encourage student autonomy, precisely as used in this study where students' reflective presentations and writing transformed observational challenges (e.g., technical language) into articulated professional insights. Experiential learning through authentic engagement is closely linked to employability. Attlee (2025) positions work experience as central to “future-proofing” degree programmes, aligning with OfS B Conditions (2022) and QAA (2024) benchmarks emphasising employability, adaptability, and the ability to navigate unpredictable contexts.

Similarly, Oxford University Careers Service (OUCS, 2024) and Vaughan et al. (2008) emphasise the importance of real-world exposure in supplementing academic learning and cultivating career readiness and transferrable skills. While creative and analytical thinking remain core employability skills, the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2025) also highlights motivation, self-management, empathy, flexibility, and customer service, all of which emerged in this case study, demonstrating the value of experiential observation for holistic professional development.

Taken together, these strands reveal an important tension in the literature: employability frameworks prioritise measurable outcomes and transferable skills, while creative pedagogies emphasise uncertainty, autonomy, and process. This tension is particularly relevant, as academic literacy development requires both structured skill-building and space for exploratory, reflective learning. The pilot study examines whether job shadowing, by combining authentic, situated observation with structured reflection, can reconcile these priorities. In doing so, it contributes to conversations around how transitional Pre-Master's programmes can integrate creative, experiential, EAP-focused and employability-oriented learning within a coherent, student-centred model.

Cohort and Preparation

Drawing on the frameworks and principles outlined above, the pilot was designed to scaffold learning with authentic observation, reflection, and opportunities for relational engagement. Providing structured opportunities to enter professional networks while engaging directly with creative practice is particularly important for international students.

The pilot cohort consisted of students enrolled on the 2024-25 International Pre-Masters:

Characteristic	Details
Cohort Size	All 8 enrolled students
Nationalities	China (4), Japan, Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia
Disciplines	Animation, Games Design (2), Interior Design, Jewellery, Illustration (2), and Photography
English Proficiency	IELTS 6.5 and above

The cohort size was considered ideal for a pilot study, as a larger group would have posed logistical and supervisory challenges. The disciplinary spread reflected the composition of the programme and allowed for insights across different creative fields.

Preparation activities were designed to develop professional awareness and networking skills: during 'October Craft Month', students attended local open studios, lectures for listening and note-taking skills, and workshops, providing initial opportunities to build connections and converse with practising professionals. Students specialising in Games Design also visited the Guildford Games Festival to establish industry contacts. However, these anticipated connections did not come to fruition.

In-class EAP sessions supported students in research to identify potential hosts, compose professional emails, and formulate inquiry questions. Peer-supported discussions encouraged critical thinking and reflection, reinforcing experiential learning principles. A tutor-signed support letter accompanied each student's outreach to prospective hosts, providing additional credibility and guidance. Academic presentations and reflective writing skills had been covered in Semester 1.

The activity was structured as a short-format observational experience rather than an extended placement. Most students completed the equivalent of one full working day, although formats varied according to host availability. Some virtual placements were divided into shorter online sessions across multiple days, and three students undertook two or more half-days with the same host. Given this limited duration, the shadowing was conceptualised as an intensive encounter designed to prompt focused observation and structured reflection rather than sustained participation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the university's Tier 1 (minimal risk) ethics review process prior to data collection. As the research was conducted within a normal educational setting and involved low-risk pedagogical evaluation, it was classified as minimal risk under institutional guidelines.

Students were informed verbally and in writing that participation in the survey component was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymised. They were assured that participation or non-participation would not affect their grades or academic standing. Survey data were anonymised prior to analysis and identifying details relating to placement hosts and organisations were removed. To minimise potential power imbalance arising from the dual lecturer–researcher role, survey responses were reviewed only after final grades had been confirmed.

Implementation Challenges

Although job shadowing is designed as an authentic, experiential learning encounter, the uncertainty and variability of real-world placement acquisition contributed to initial difficulties for students, highlighting the inherent challenges of situated learning outside structured academic contexts.

Despite strong enthusiasm, students encountered significant challenges in securing job shadow opportunities independently. Limited professional networks and low response rates from potential hosts meant that only two students initially secured these independently. Ultimately, tutor mediation enabled all eight students to complete meaningful experiences: five undertook in-person job shadowing, two Games students completed virtual shadows, and one Animation student attended a professional industry event

Understanding these difficulties through a CoP lens, students, as newcomers, were navigating unfamiliar professional networks, with structured tutor support serving as a bridge into these communities. Cultural expectations may have shaped assumptions about how easy securing a placement would be. Several students, drawing on interpersonal norms from their home contexts, appeared to anticipate that potential hosts would respond quickly and positively to initial requests, even though they had been advised that non-responses or refusals were likely. Tutor observations suggest that some students may not have fully internalised these possibilities, which may have contributed to their early difficulties in approaching industry contacts.

As only two students secured hosts independently, tutor intervention was necessary to ensure all students had a job shadow opportunity, reflecting the balance described in experiential learning literature between fostering autonomy and providing scaffolding in uncertain, open-ended tasks (Addison, 2014; Orr, 2025). This involved researching discipline-

specific practitioners or companies and generating multiple leads for each student - a time-consuming endeavour. In one instance, the tutor accompanied a less confident student to a business, providing the introduction that ultimately secured a shadowing opportunity. These interventions ensured participation but also highlight significant issues around scalability and the challenges of supporting diverse creative disciplines without specialist domain knowledge. In addition, it raises questions about how and to what extent such activities foster student autonomy.

Misaligned expectations about what a job shadow typically involves, particularly the balance between observation and hands-on participation, may have further contributed to students' difficulties. This suggests the need for EAP-led explicit preparatory guidance on professional communication norms, intercultural expectations, realistic outcomes of job-shadowing experiences, and strategies for proactively engaging with potential hosts.

While these challenges initially hindered placement acquisition, they also mirror authentic workplace dynamics, providing opportunities for students to develop adaptability, self-management, and communication skills central to employability frameworks.

Data Collection and Evaluation

Data collection comprised:

- pre-placement tutorials, capturing students' aims, confidence levels, and logistical details for the risk assessment (Appendix A),
- experience logs (Appendix B),
- an evaluative post-placement survey which included 15 Likert-scale items and six open-ended questions (Appendix C).

This was complemented by two EAP outputs which enabled students to translate that engagement into academic discourse:

- a 5-minute presentation describing the job shadow experience and how it influenced their FMP
- a 500-word written evaluation reflecting on feelings, challenges in the complete process and benefits for future degree and career

Finally, observation of whether the job shadow had been integrated into the FMP was based on evidence from the final project outcomes.

While the survey focused on perceptions of the job-shadowing experience, EAP-related developments were primarily evidenced through pre-placement tutorials, presentations and written evaluations.

Findings

Pre-placement tutorials revealed that five students felt confident and excited about the upcoming job-shadowing experience, while three expressed concerns: two related to English comprehension and one to placement uncertainty. The language-related concerns highlight the relevance of EAP support in preparing students to engage with specialised disciplinary contexts. Capturing student aims, made findings more measurable and provided a benchmark for evaluating outcomes in presentations, writing and the student survey.

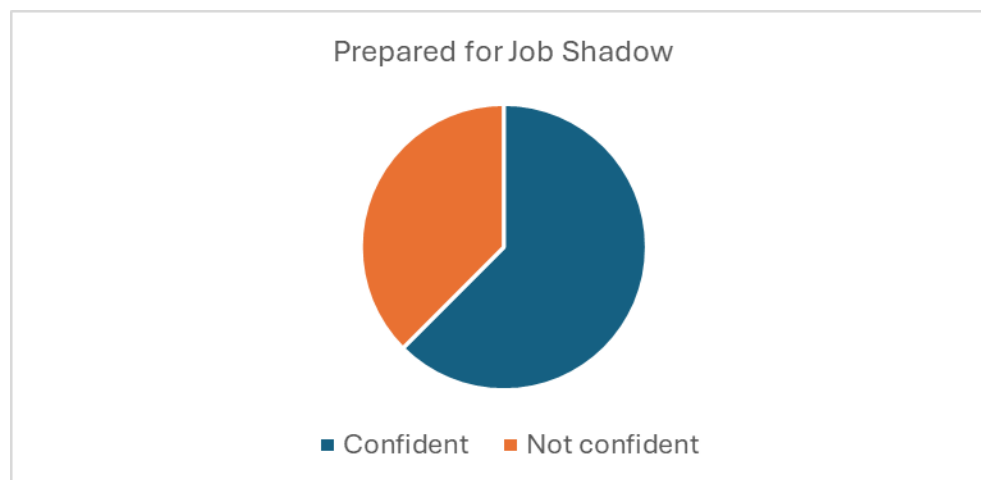


Figure 1: Findings: pre-placement tutorial

Likert-scale questions from the survey were grouped into 3 thematic categories: (A) Host Interaction and Environment, (B) Career Understanding and Skill Insight, and (C) Overall Experience and Value, aligning with common frameworks in experiential learning (Appendix D). Results showed generally positive responses, with few disagreement responses and no 'strong disagree' [exact distribution can be found in Appendix C and Fig. 2].

Host Interaction and Environment

Participants reported very positive interactions with their hosts. All in-person participants strongly agreed that hosts were welcoming and approachable and the majority indicated that hosts explained work clearly. Most students felt that opportunities for dialogue and asking questions were ample, although two virtual participants noted limited interaction. This is an expected difference, with in-person placements offering more meaningful entry into the hosts' practice, while virtual formats sometimes restrict that engagement. Most hosts consistently discussed the positive aspects of their profession, while fewer provided information about negative aspects, resulting in more varied responses on that item. Taken together, these patterns indicate that the placements provided students with varying degrees of access to the hosts' practice, with richer engagement occurring when interactions were more sustained and dialogic.

Career Understanding and Skill Insight

Across the cohort, students reported clear gains in their understanding of the career field. Most participants agreed or strongly agreed that the experience improved their understanding of required skills, areas for further development, and the responsibilities and expectations related to education, portfolios, and networking. Opportunities to observe creative processes varied by placement, producing a broader spread of responses. Similarly, while the majority observed a variety of tasks and projects, two students reported a more limited range. The games students appreciated the virtual format but sought clearer task focus.

Overall Experience and Value

Students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the job-shadowing experience. The majority reported that it met their expectations and was valuable, and most found the activities engaging and informative. Seven of eight students indicated they would recommend the job shadow to others, reflecting strong overall endorsement.

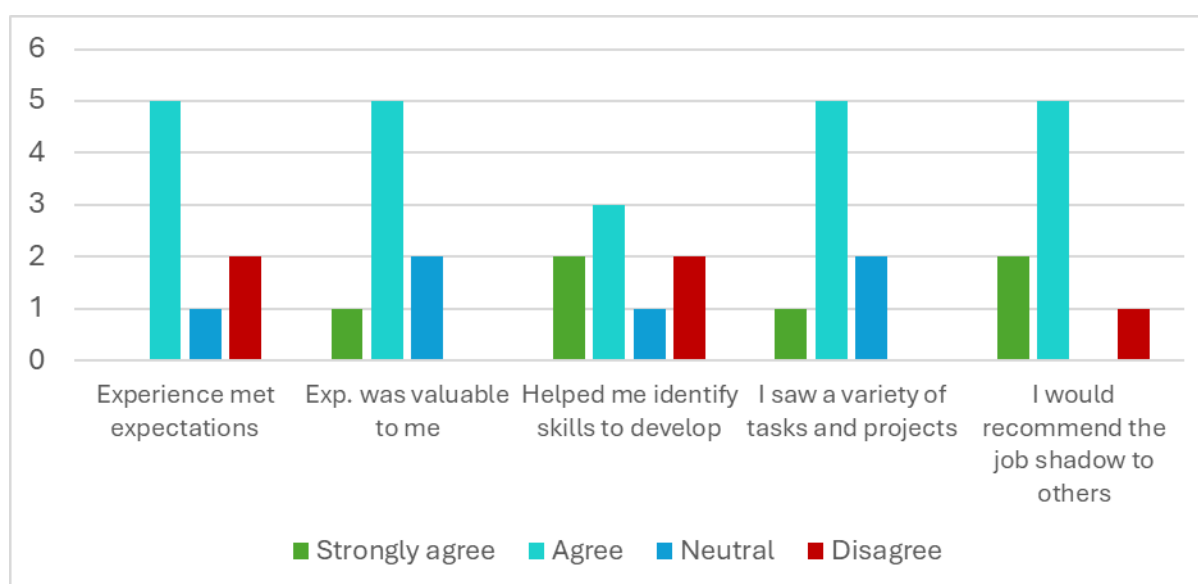


Figure 2: Selected findings: post-experience survey Likert-scale questions

In addition to the Likert-scale questions, the survey included six open-ended items (Appendix C) that explored students' experiences in greater depth. Responses were analysed separately to capture narrative insights regarding:

- challenges
- student-perceived benefits
- suggestions for improvement
- cultural context
- EAP/ESAP-related outcomes

Open-ended responses highlighted the novelty of the experience and its perceived value in bridging academic and professional contexts, while also identifying key challenges: including understanding technical language and managing expectations about the observational nature of the task.

Challenges

Students' responses to Questions 1 and 4 overlapped strongly, with both prompts eliciting descriptions of the challenges they faced during the job-shadow day itself rather than across different stages of the overall process. As participants did not clearly distinguish between task-specific difficulty (Q1) and challenges in the broader process (Q4), these findings are combined here. Future iterations of the study should refine these prompts to ensure that challenges at different stages of the programme are more distinctly captured.

Some struggled to see how isolated tasks connected to broader professional contexts, as reflected by the interior design student:

I did not understand how fabric selection connects to interior design. I only grouped textiles without learning how they are used in a real project.

Instances of cognitive overload emerged when information was delivered densely without practical engagement, although one student remarked that "everything was very clear," showing variability across placements.

It was difficult to memorise all the talks since I couldn't get hands-on experience.
[Animation student]

Students also highlighted challenges linked to working within a professional environment and being expected to contribute meaningfully. Adjusting to the pace of professional workflows was noted: "*being able to process information quickly*", and several students found discipline-specific tasks demanding:

I was challenged when she asked my opinion on how to make a piece more cohesive
[Jewellery student].

Limited opportunities for hands-on practice were occasionally a source of frustration, indicating that engagement varied across hosts and disciplines.

In sum, students' challenges centred on understanding specialised tasks, adapting to professional expectations, and navigating unfamiliar tools and processes during the shadowing experience.

Student-perceived benefits

Just as with Q1 and Q4, students' answers to Q2 and Q3 did not meaningfully differentiate between (a) what they enjoyed or found useful on the job-shadow day itself, and (b) what they found most interesting across the whole process from introduction to completion. In practice, responses to both questions addressed the same themes: observing professional practice, gaining creative or technical insight, and interacting with practitioners. This overlap justifies combining the findings and noting that future studies should reword these items to prompt clearer temporal distinctions.

Students most appreciated opportunities to observe and engage with creative and technical processes. Many valued gaining hands-on insight into discipline-specific skills, such as *"the practice of understanding the tools,"* or experimenting with programme-generation content. Observing professionals at work was especially impactful for students in specialised fields:

learning how to craft interactive and immersive sounds to add depth and richness to an animation [Animation student]

A second prominent theme involved learning through interaction. Students highlighted the usefulness of witnessing client communication and customer-service strategies:

this experience taught me how to approach customers with patience and understanding, especially when their preferences are complicated or hard to communicate [Interior design student]

Several appreciated learning about artists' or designers' career pathway: *"interviewing the artist... gave me insights into his career"*, while for others the experience offered professional networking:

I now have more connections to people working with jewellery [Jewellery student]

Students additionally reflected on the personally inspiring and horizon-broadening nature of the experience, describing it as motivating them to *"keep an open mind"* and helping them see creative practice in new ways.

Overall, though sometimes challenging, students identified hands-on creative engagement, observation of professional practice, and meaningful interaction with practitioners as the most enjoyable and interesting aspects of their job-shadow experience.

Suggestions for improvement

Students offered a range of suggestions for enhancing future job-shadowing opportunities (Q5) with a strong emphasis on increasing the level of active participation. Several participants called for *"more hands-on opportunity and explanations"* and expressed a

desire to be involved in *“real design work rather than just organising materials.”* Others recommended extending the scope, *“multiple different positions to enhance the experience”*, and duration of the activity, proposing *“more days for the activity or a longer internship”*, to allow deeper engagement with professional practice.

Although one student noted that the experience *“was a great experience that inspired me,”* others expressed hopes for more formal or industry-specific placements in the future, such as the aspiration to *“enter an illustration company.”*

Collectively, these suggestions indicate a desire for more immersive, skill-aligned experiences with greater hands-on involvement and broader exposure to professional contexts.

Cultural context

When asked whether similar job-shadowing opportunities existed in their home countries (Q6) most students indicated that the experience was entirely new. Having no preconceptions may have contributed to the positive outcome: Six participants commented that this was *“brand new”* for them and emphasised that it had been a valuable and novel learning opportunity. One Indonesian student reported having encountered such opportunities before but did not provide further detail. The Thai student noted she had previously completed an internship as part of her degree. However, it had been arranged by others and was not aligned with her field of study:

I was studying political science but went to a civil engineering company.

In summary, these responses indicate that structured, discipline-relevant job shadowing is not widely available or common within the students’ home contexts, underscoring the distinctiveness and perceived value of the pilot programme.

EAP/ESAP-related outcomes

Although the survey did not include specific EAP-focused items, some replies to Questions 1, 4 and 5 related to EAP/Academic skills.

Most commonly, although all students met the programme’s IELTS entry requirement, students found it challenging to understand or engage with technical and discipline-specific tasks. EAP skills did not always transfer smoothly to the highly specialised professional language used in the job-shadow, with several students reporting that specialised processes were difficult to follow when explained verbally, but that demonstrations sometimes helped compensate:

Some technical aspects, like chemical mixing in film processing, were initially difficult to understand. However, asking questions and observing the professional helped me.
[Photography student].

This reflects students' need for guidance in understanding professional processes and scaffolded support as described in experiential learning literature (Addison, 2014; Orr, 2025).

This also links to some students suggesting the need for better preparation in Q5, for example an introductory session to strengthen relevant skills such as technical terminology, although they acknowledged that such support "*would need to be personalised.*" This aligns with the role of EAP in equipping students with the linguistic and communicative tools needed to navigate specialised professional settings.

As a result of the survey not incorporating explicit EAP-focused items, claims regarding academic literacy development are drawn primarily from analysis of the EAP outputs rather than their self-reported measures. Presentation performance was generally strong: most students presented confidently, making appropriate use of notes and slides. A minority, however, evidenced the need for further support, particularly regarding the reading of complete text rather than using notecards. Content provided good insight into students' job-shadowing experiences, particularly in relation to soft skills and techniques, and aligned closely with responses to open-ended survey questions 2 and 3. Connections to the FMP were included but were at times superficial, suggesting an area for further curriculum scaffolding.

Written evaluations were coherently structured and showed effective use of topic sentences and transition phrases, reflecting writing skills developed in Semester 1. As with the presentations, tutor feedback centred on issues of repetition, overlap with presentation content and limited reflective depth or insufficient concrete examples. To address these challenges, colour-coded feedback helped distinguish description from analysis and evaluation, thereby encouraging a more balanced, critically informed text.

Observation of the final project outcomes established that at least two students had actively incorporated an element of the experience into their FMP:

- the photography student made use of black and white exposure and development techniques learnt during the job shadow and
- the interior design student integrated textiles/samples she had been provided with.

This indicates that elements of the job-shadow experience were carried forward into students' creative practice.

Discussion and Analysis

The job-shadowing pilot demonstrated strong positive outcomes, with students consistently describing the experience as novel, meaningful, and motivating. While a small number noted the experience did not fully meet their expectations, particularly in relation to limited hands-on participation, overall enthusiasm remained high. This pattern suggests that any dissatisfaction stemmed more from the structural constraints of short observational placements than the authenticity or relevance of the experience itself. The findings therefore support the pedagogical argument that structured, authentic encounters with professional practice can enhance student engagement and promote situated learning, even when the learning environment is unfamiliar and primarily observational.

For EAP practitioners, the findings highlight how authentic professional encounters can support the development of academic communication skills, requiring students to interpret, articulate, and reflect on discipline-specific practices through academic English. This exposure to authentic creative work environments resonates with Carr et al.'s (2021) view that effective EAP in the creative arts requires close engagement with disciplinary values and practices, enabling learners to navigate the intersection of academic and professional literacies. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating how even brief, structured observational encounters can function as a form of disciplinary socialisation within ESAP contexts.

Dialogic Reflection in Practice

The structured reflective logs and presentations provided a forum for dialogic reflection, allowing students to process experiences collaboratively. In line with Bakhtin's (1981) emphasis on dialogism, these conversations enabled students to reframe their initial reactions, clarify areas of uncertainty and integrate learning, even when placements were brief or partially observational. Such reflective processes also align closely with EAP goals by engaging students in extended academic discourse, strengthening their ability to describe, analyse, and evaluate professional practice using appropriate academic and disciplinary language. Although this reflective dialogue effectively supported sense-making at the level of the job-shadow activity, it did not consistently translate into broader academic or project-based integration. This suggests that while reflective structures were valuable, stronger alignment with ongoing coursework could deepen the transfer of learning into core academic trajectories such as the FMP.

Learning Benefits and Impacts

Job-shadowing facilitates participation in CoP (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), fostering professional identity formation and a situated understanding of creative work. Addressing the access gap, it offers observational pathways into UK professional creative practices and proved especially valuable for international students who often lack local networks or familiarity with UK contexts. This highlights the distinctiveness of the pilot programme, demonstrating the relational bridges central to CoP: students accessed tacit knowledge, observed disciplinary norms, and gained initial entry into professional networks.

Within this process, EAP-focused input on observation, disciplinary communication, and reflection provides the linguistic and academic skills framework for articulating student development.

The pilot also aligns with the WEF's (2025) identification of motivation, self-management, empathy, flexibility, and customer service as increasingly important skills. A range of student comments affirm emerging development in these areas: *"If I find myself in a similar situation again, I will remain more open-minded and adaptable, ready to learn from unexpected circumstance"*. Evidence from the pilot indicates that these competencies surfaced alongside creative and analytical thinking, particularly when navigating ambiguity, engaging in problem-solving discussions with hosts, and adjusting to unfamiliar professional expectations. This strengthens research that positions socially embedded industry experiences as catalysts for wider skill formation (Peppler et al., 2022).

Students gain important communication and leadership skills when educators incorporate social engagement into the curriculum. The study indicates that such intentional actions, partnering university staff, professional creatives and students, can prepare students for the future by having a positive impact on student's creative skills, voice, engagement, and sense of agency. Particularly for international students, such encounters expose learners to authentic disciplinary discourse, offering opportunities to observe how language is used in specialised professional settings, something that is often difficult to replicate in classroom-based EAP provision.

Virtual job shadowing demonstrated how digital technologies provide growing opportunities for students to gain entry to workforce experiences. Virtual experiences, while offering less sustained interaction, nonetheless exposed students to authentic workflows and required them to adopt communication strategies suited to remote interaction. This is particularly relevant to EAP, given the increasing importance of teaching students to communicate effectively in digitally mediated academic and professional environments and supports the idea that digital forms of practice can still provide meaningful access to professional knowledge, albeit differently configured.

The experience also functioned as a structured form of primary research, introducing students to observational and inquiry-based methods that are central to academic literacy development and to the research expectations of postgraduate study.

Challenges in adaptation, cognitive load and contextual understanding

A key reported difficulty was adapting to the professional environments encountered. Many students expressed struggling with the cognitive demands of highly specialised or abstract tasks, particularly when these were communicated verbally rather than demonstrated, highlighting typical EAP concerns around language scaffolding and transfer into professional domains. These challenges reflect the linguistic demands placed on multilingual learners, who

must navigate tacit, field-specific professional discourse delivered at pace, pointing to a need for EAP mediation sessions: pre-teaching key vocabulary and modelling questioning strategies, to help students navigate linguistic and cognitive challenges more confidently.

Several students also appeared unsure of how discrete tasks connected to broader professional workflows, indicating that contextualisation remains an important area for development within short job-shadow formats. Vaughan et al. (2008) highlight the pervasive role of 'expectational ambiguity' in creative learning environments, whereby learners must navigate uncertain and ill-defined professional practices to construct meaning and professional identity. Such ambiguity can make it difficult for students to integrate short-term observational experiences into coherent understandings of disciplinary workflows, a pattern evident in this study's qualitative data. This indicates a broader need across the cohort to see not only the activity but also its purpose within real workflow scenarios. The challenges were not uniform, however: a minority of students reported little difficulty navigating technical or conceptual content, highlighting that prior experience, L2 confidence, disciplinary background, or host communication style may shape how accessible the experience feels.

These variations reflect the inherent unpredictability of authentic, situated-learning encounters, in which students are exposed to professional practices that are not easily standardised and do not neatly align with classroom-based scaffolding. Rather than signalling shortcomings, they illuminate the productive tension between real-world practice and the structural demands of curriculum design. The learning value lies not only in competence gain but also in navigating ambiguity and interpreting tacit knowledge, provided that adequate pedagogical support is available.

Programme Alignment and Structural considerations

Presentations, evaluations and peer discussion were insightful but many lacked depth in connecting experiences to the FMP. This may reflect workload pressures during reading week, and fragmented assessment modes: having presented their FMP proposals the previous day, before presenting their job shadow experience, students may well have included elements of this in the former, possibly constraining deeper synthesis. Though lecturers collaborated closely on the FMP requirements across modules, further alignment, such as joint assessments, co-teaching models, or a unified presentation that integrates both the job-shadow and FMP proposal, could mitigate these issues, avoiding duplication and reducing workload for students and more effectively linking experiential learning with core academic outputs.

The integration of job-shadow experiences into students' FMPs appeared uneven. Although some students incorporated specific techniques or materials into their final work, others showed more tacit or indirect forms of influence that were less visible to the EAP lecturer. From a theoretical perspective, this is unsurprising: participation in a CoP often leads to forms of learning and influence that are tacit, emergent, or embedded in disciplinary ways of thinking rather than explicitly signposted. Consequently, some students may have drawn on the

job-shadow experience in subtle ways that were not immediately visible to the academic skills lecturer, particularly in fields such as animation and games, where domain-specific knowledge is required to recognise such forms of integration. This further highlights the role EAP can play in supporting students to articulate experiential learning within academic genres, helping them bridge professional experience with the rhetorical and reflective expectations of postgraduate-level study. Assessing this integration accurately, however, would require closer collaboration with discipline-specific lecturers, something made difficult by workload pressures especially during assessment periods.

Scalability, Sustainability, and Institutional Considerations

While providing valuable insights into the pedagogical benefits of authentic, community-based learning, the pilot revealed challenges in terms of staff workload and scalability. The tutor mediation required to secure hosts and support student confidence, would be difficult to sustain with larger cohorts.

While the pilot cohort consisted of eight students, previous iterations of the international Pre-Masters programme have ranged between 15 and 25 students. A return to those cohort sizes would substantially increase the logistical demands of placement acquisition. The intensive individual support required in this pilot, including researching discipline-specific contacts and generating multiple leads per student, would not be proportionally feasible without institutional coordination, shared industry partnerships, or dedicated placement support structures. The pedagogical model therefore appears viable, but its scalability is contingent upon structural alignment and resource allocation beyond the individual EAP tutor role.

For EAP lecturers, whose responsibilities already include linguistic preparation, confidence-building, and reflective support, such mediation can be particularly resource-intensive. At the same time, the programme demonstrated notable flexibility: it accommodated multiple disciplines, mixed delivery formats, and varied levels of student preparedness. Sustainable expansion would require coordinated placement management and shared assessment responsibilities, alongside longer-term partnerships with industry professionals to reduce reliance on individual tutor intervention.

In summary, the job-shadow pilot provided Pre-Masters students with a unique opportunity to engage with professional creative practice. Observing real-world tasks and experimenting with discipline-specific techniques offered insight into workflows, collaboration, and employability. With scaffolded reflection, tutor support, and institutional backing, such immersive placements have clear potential to prepare international students for postgraduate study and creative industry engagement.

Future Directions

To enhance the impact and feasibility of job shadowing, it is recommended that future iterations of the activity should provide for earlier preparation, enabling students to build networks over the course of the programme. For international students, this preparatory stage also offers a key site for EAP support, helping them develop the linguistic and pragmatic skills needed to initiate contact with hosts and navigate professional communication as part of their academic development.

Building community partnerships through a shared database of local hosts and alumni mentors could reduce tutor workload, support scalability, and strengthen institutional collaboration. Larger and more diverse cohorts may also facilitate longer-term host relationships, gradually reducing the need for individualised placement-seeking.

The limited, explicit connections to the FMP underscores the importance of alignment between experiential activities and discipline-specific curricula, as well as collaborative planning across modules to ensure meaningful integration. EAP provision can play a mediating role in this alignment by helping students translate workplace observations into academic genres, reflective writing, and the research-oriented discourse required for the FMP. Greater involvement of discipline lecturers, even in light-touch or asynchronous ways, may help identify integration into academic projects not visible to non-specialists. Clarifying that integration need not be literal but can involve adopting professional reasoning, workflows, or stylistic conventions may encourage deeper engagement in subsequent such projects. Institutional support, through EAP-discipline co-teaching, coordinated assessment, and timetabling, is essential to maximize the value of job-shadowing within broader academic structures.

Future iterations should continue to refine preparatory guidance, balance observation and hands-on participation, and ensure alignment with academic goals to maximize both experiential and reflective learning outcomes. EAP teaching could support students with scaffolded opportunities, including language to articulate how the experience informs their developing practice, improving critical framing and the narrative coherence needed for discipline-based discussions or short presentations, thus reducing cognitive demands and addressing the limited depth of reflection observed in this pilot.

Future research should include host feedback to triangulate student perceptions and assess the reciprocal benefits of participation. Longer or repeated experiences could enhance skill development and professional identity formation and students might be encouraged to pursue further placements independently.

While highly personalised, discipline-specific placements as outlined in this study provide meaningful learning and motivation, the time and resource costs may limit scalability for larger cohorts. Nevertheless, initiatives such as this highlight the value of innovative,

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outward-facing approaches that empower students as autonomous learners, strengthen community engagement, and enhance institutional profile through collaborative partnerships.

For EAP teams, such initiatives also strengthen the role of language and academic skills specialists in institution-wide employability and community-engagement agendas, reinforcing the disciplinary contribution of EAP to collaborative pedagogic innovation. As Jones et al. (2001, n.p.) argue, maintaining the professional profile of EAP lecturers within institutions requires strategic collaboration:

one powerful way to maintain our profile within our own institutions and within the broader context is to continue to enter into new collaborative partnerships with faculty and with students for the purpose of practice and research.

Conclusion

This pilot study shows that short, authentic, discipline-specific job-shadowing experiences can enhance international Pre-Masters students' employability awareness, self-confidence, reflective capacity, and EAP-related academic literacies. Paired with structured reflection, such experiences foster adaptive, interpretive, and relational learning, supporting participation in professional Communities of Practice. Despite logistical challenges, students gained valuable insights into professional contexts and identified transferable skills for future study and work. Embedding similar initiatives earlier in the curriculum, with preparatory guidance and alignment to learning outcomes, offers a scalable model to bridge academic study and professional practice for diverse, international cohorts.

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Appendix A

Pre-Placement discussion with lecturer

Student name and number:

Date of discussion:

Role you will shadow:

Potential host(s) for shadow (name and contact details):

Suggested date(s) for placement:

Confidence in preparedness for placement? Is there anything you still need support with?

Do you have contact numbers ready in case of an emergency?

Aims during the job shadowing placement? (e.g. skills, knowledge, experience you wish to develop?)

How the placement may contribute toward the development of your project?

Appendix B

Experience Logs

Date of event	What was the development activity?	What was I expecting to learn?	What have I learned?	How will I apply this learning?

Appendix C

Post job shadow evaluation questionnaire with table entries showing distribution of student responses

Job Shadow Evaluation Questionnaire

Due Date:

Student Name:

Date of job shadow:

Business/Artist:

Specialism:

Please fill out the following evaluation of your shadowing experience. This will help us monitor the programme and make improvements that will help students in the future.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The experience met my expectations		2	1	5	
The host was friendly and welcoming				4	4
The experience was valuable to me			2	5	1
I gained a better understanding of the skills required for this career		1	1	4	2
The experience helped me identify skills I still need to develop		2	1	3	2
The activities I participated in were engaging and informative		2		5	1
I had opportunity to ask questions and get responses		2(virtual shadows)	1		5
The host explained their work clearly			1	4	3
I gained a better understanding of daily responsibilities in this career			2	5	1
I was able to observe or participate in creative	1	1	2	3	1

processes such as design, illustration, painting, or digital media					
I now have a better idea of what I need to do (education, portfolio, networking) to succeed in this industry		1	1	5	1
I was able to see a variety of tasks and projects during my experience.			2	5	1
My host discussed positive aspects of this career				4	4
My host discussed negative aspects of this career		4	1	1	2
I would recommend this job shadow to other students		1		5	2

Open-ended questions: please provide short answers in complete sentences to the following:

1. What aspects of the job shadow day were most difficult for you to understand? (the day itself)
2. What aspects of the job did you most enjoy observing and learning about or what was the most useful aspect of the day itself?
3. What was the most interesting part of the whole job shadowing process? (from when I first introduced the experience until completion)
4. What was the most challenging part of the whole job shadowing process? (from when I first introduced the experience until completion)

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5. What suggestions do you have to improve future job shadowing experiences and opportunities?

6. Do you have job shadow experience in your own country/educational system? (Was this new to you?)

Any other Comments/Suggestions:

Thank you for your feedback!

Appendix D

Post-Placement Survey results: grouped

Themes – Likert questions

A. Host Interaction & Environment

- The host was friendly and welcoming
- I had opportunity to ask questions and get responses
- The host explained their work clearly
- My host discussed positive aspects of this career
- My host discussed negative aspects of this career

B. Career Understanding & Skill Insight

- I gained a better understanding of the skills required for this career
- The experience helped me identify skills I still need to develop
- I gained a better understanding of daily responsibilities in this career
- I now have a better idea of what I need to do (education, portfolio, networking) to succeed in this industry
- I was able to observe or participate in creative processes (design, illustration, painting, digital media)
- I was able to see a variety of tasks and projects during my experience.

C. Overall Experience & Value

- The experience met my expectations
- The experience was valuable to me
- The activities were engaging and informative
- I would recommend this job shadow to other students